

# PROMISED LAND

*Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform*

Edited by Peter Rosset, Raj Patel, and Michael Courville

*A project of the Land Research Action Network (LRAN)*

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This book is dedicated to all those who struggle for land that has been promised, yet never delivered, to the hundreds of peasant women and men who are assassinated every year for daring to claim their right to land, and to the hundreds of indigenous people who are murdered for defending their ancestral territories.

Thanks to your struggle and sacrifice, a better world *is* possible.

## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

# The Resurgence of Agrarian Reform in the Twenty-first Century

*Michael Courville and Raj Patel*

We have a real problem with land tenancy; land distribution—  
*mucha tierra en pocas manos* (much land in few hands)<sup>a</sup>—  
not everyone has land and everyone needs some!  
—*Honduran small-scale farmer*

Although more people now live in cities than in rural areas, a significant proportion of the world's poor still live in the countryside. For them, no less than for their homeless counterparts in towns and cities, landlessness remains a pervasive social problem. From the dawn of modern capitalism in sixteenth-century Britain (Wood 2000) to contemporary land claims in Zimbabwe (Moyo 2000; Moyo and Yeros 2005) land has been, and continues to be, at the center of rural conflict.<sup>1</sup>

A constant theme in conflicts over land is control, both of the land itself and of material resources and uses associated with it, such as water, wood, minerals, grazing and gathering. This control hinges on property rights. The ability to own and transfer possession of land through private property, in turn, has invariably been predicated on other forms of economic, social, and cultural power. At the same time, the development and concentration of private property rights have typically been mechanisms for entrenching and consolidating the power of some groups over others. Perhaps the starkest example of the inequities propagated through the privatization of property is seen through the lens of gender: while they produce the majority of the world's food, for example, women in the Global South<sup>2</sup> own only 1 percent of the land. The dominance of the private property model has allowed landownership to become increasingly concentrated along existing lines of power in the hands of fewer and fewer people, usually men. Exceptions to this rule are hard won.

Private property ignores need in favor of the demands of rule and order. As

<sup>a</sup> edited for clarity by author in online publication .

Wood notes (2000), the instantiation of such property rights has involved nothing less than the birth of our modern capitalist world. The transformation of the relationship that farmers, producers, and, indeed, landlords had with the land, turning it into an entity that can be traded and mediated by the market, changed the character of rural life forever. The expansion of land markets had the effect of dislocating the peasantry economically, physically, and socially, first in England and then, within an astonishingly short period of time, in the rest of the world.

This pattern would be reproduced in the colonies, and indeed in post-Independence America, where the independent small farmers who were supposed to be the backbone of a free republic faced, from the beginning, the stark choice of agrarian capitalism: at best, intense self-exploitation, and at worst, dispossession and displacement by larger, more productive enterprises. (Wood 2000)

The inequality resulting from this dislocation brought radical social change across the world (Polanyi 1944; Williams 1994, 41–103). Thousands of peasants and smallholders were pushed off the land toward new cities and towns. Once there, they became integrated into a new set of social relations that no longer depended upon a primary relationship to the land (Brown 1988, 28–31). During the early colonial period in the United States, in a nation that had little actual peasantry<sup>3</sup> and that championed free market liberalism, the swift and uneven concentration of land was widely thought to foment social unrest. Led by Thomas Paine, a demand for “agrarian justice” was advanced, calling for an equal distribution of land or for just compensation to small farmers, to avoid the ill effects observed during England’s feverish land grab of the eighteenth century (Paine 1925). This call for justice fell on deaf ears as the United States moved toward industrial expansion and did not look back.

The increased concentration into fewer hands of agricultural land around the world continues to this day, with little regard for the overwhelming evidence of the landlessness<sup>4</sup> and inequality it has caused (Herring 2000; Thiesenhusen 1995, 159–62; Umehara and Bautista 2004, 3–18). The extent of this concentration of control undoubtedly would be more severe were it not for persistent and ongoing resistance, with new agrarian struggles commanding the attention of millions worldwide. The struggles of the landless in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have brought a renewed demand for agrarian and land reform around the world. This book provides an overview of these struggles, the issues and policies they confront, and the links that bind them together.

## The Shifting Demands for Agrarian Change

Early nineteenth-century land tenure reforms were often taken up, particularly in Latin America, by fledgling states as they struggled to break free from their colonial past. More often than not, the catalyst for land tenure reform and early agrarian change during this era was the liberation of a new merchant class and the emancipation of national elites from the vestiges of colonial power and religious rule. The consideration of the small farmer rarely, if ever, figured into this burgeoning expansion of colonial relations. The importance of the small farmer, however, would come to the fore as national development projects of the late nineteenth century began to confront the obstacle posed by feudal land relations.

The agrarian question of the late nineteenth century pivoted on the role of the small-farm sector and the pace of capitalism's movement into agricultural production. By the early twentieth century, a now-classic debate emerged in the Soviet Union, between those who championed the inevitability of large-farm dominance and efficiency, as argued by Karl Kautsky (1988, reprint), and the family farm economy as a viable alternative path to development, championed by Alexander Chayanov (1966). The former positioned the small farmer as transitory, a shrinking class in the transition to capitalist development in the countryside. The latter viewed the small producer as a central actor in the economic activity of the countryside, destined to maintain an integral position within the rural class structure. Kautsky's analysis and argument for a more efficient, modernized agricultural sector helped move the peasantry off the land and toward industrialized cities. The Kautskian view of agrarian change shared much of the optimism found in classic theories of industrialization and capitalist transition at the turn of the twentieth century; it was a vision that captured the imaginations of most world leaders struggling for independence, and it shaped the policies of revolutionary nations aiming for rapid, large-scale conversion of the agricultural sector. The small-farm path to development was, conversely, often viewed as reactionary, anachronistic, and romantic.

Twentieth-century industrial production biases directed the practice of most national rural development schemes toward input-intensive, monocultural production that, crucially, required large contiguous areas of land in order to be successful. Sowing the seeds of a new "national agriculture" along these lines, governments turned away from the rural poor, who had their own vision for agrarian change. The Chayanovian view of a different rural vision, based

on family farms and peasant cooperatives, has its echoes today in peasant movement struggles for agrarian reform (see the conclusion in this volume).

The national reorganization of the countryside in favor of industrial agriculture was made possible, paradoxically, by struggles for national liberation, which drew heavily on ideas of land being for the people. From the end of the Second World War until the fall of the Berlin Wall, efforts for independence from colonialization were suffused with the rhetoric of democracy, equality, and rights, while they bore differing visions of land and agrarian reform for national change. The extent to which this rhetoric matched reality depended on a complex amalgam of domestic and international circumstances and choices, with highly variable outcomes in different countries (as we detail below). With the end of the Cold War, however, the debate over land redistribution has narrowed dramatically. Formerly a central point in a program of postcolonial independence, agrarian and land reform programs are now framed by considerations of equity and production efficiency arbitrated by the World Bank, with the full support of international finance institutions and their network of local elites.

This shift in focus differs dramatically from the original understanding of agrarian reform as a means to a range of outcomes including dignity, justice, and sovereignty, and as a platform in a broader process of national enfranchisement and democracy. Today, it is possible to see a convergence of agrarian policies in different countries, shaped by each nation's domestic political considerations but tending toward a common set of features: property, scale, technology, and the market. This is the neoliberalization of agrarian policy—a process that has its analogues across a range of other domains, from trade to the role of the state (Magdoff, Foster, and Buttel 2000).

Neoliberal agrarian reforms diagnose, and prescribe policies for, rural areas in ways that differ significantly from the national liberation projects of the twentieth century. Through this analytical paradigm shift, the policies to which the term “land reform” refers have altered beyond recognition from their mid-twentieth century counterparts. Most centrally, redistributive state-led agrarian reform is unthinkable within this new paradigm. Instead, policy discussions now highlight considerations of efficiency, making issues of equality and distributive justice secondary, if they are considered at all. Many of the most prominent and recent arguments for and against land reform since the Cold War have come to pivot on economic questions (de Janvry and Sadoulet 1989; de Janvry et al. eds. 2001; Kay 2002a; Deininger et al. 2003; Griffin, Khan, and Ickowitz 2002). Along the way, an interest in small farmer

efficiency has reemerged as a legitimate debate and policy concern. Many World Bank development economists have come around to the view that the redistribution of land to small farmers would lead to greater overall productivity and economic dynamism (Deininger 1999; Binswanger, Deininger, and Feder 1995), a view long since arrived at by others (see Barret 1993; Berry and Cline 1979; Cornia 1985; Ellis 1993; Feder 1985; Lappé et al. 1998; Prosterman and Riedinger 1987; Rosset 1999; Sobhan 1993; Tomich, Kilby, and Johnston 1995).

It is a measure of the success of this neoliberal reframing of policy that even those scholars and policy makers who side with arguments for redistributive land reform find themselves doing so on terms of economic growth—as increased Gross Domestic Product (GDP)—and not on terms of justice, food sovereignty,<sup>5</sup> equality, or rural transformation. Nonetheless, it is useful to see, for example, as Griffin, Khan, and Ickowitz (2002) have demonstrated, using what they term a “heterodox economic framework” (though see Byres 2004a, b), that without a redistribution of land in the Global South, economic growth will continue to evade the best efforts at top-down development, and the chasm between poverty and wealth will continue to deepen. Griffin, Khan, and Ickowitz (2004, 362–63) offer a theoretical model that allows for consideration of the political dimensions of resource distribution—land in this case—by considering the socially sanctioned dimensions of property law and the ways in which property rights change over time.

When and how property is defined and regulated reflects the struggle for power in any given place and is subject to change usually in alignment with the needs of large property owners and the goals of the state (Kerkvliet and Selden 1998, 50–53). The case of Guatemala is helpful for illustrating this process (see chapter 1 in this volume). The definition of public lands, or *economiendas*, in colonial Guatemala was sufficient to maintain the colonial lords’ power and access to land, but it stood in the way of the desires of the new merchant class upon independence. Land law was reconfigured to facilitate land seizure from the Church and taxes were brought upon the old *latifundistas* who left so much land idle (Scofield 1990, 161–65; Williams 1994, 58–60). Agrarian reform can be and has always been a political as well as an economic demand, and it is the political aspect of redistributive reform—who calls for the reforms and on what terms—that has been so caustic throughout the twentieth century, and even more so in the beginning of the twenty-first century. While it has become somewhat less controversial to call for land reform on economic grounds (as Griffin, Khan, and Ickowitz [2002] have done), economically based arguments for land alone will not be sufficient to change the



structured inequalities of the rural sector. As the logic of neoliberalism continues to unfold across the globe, a suffocating economism<sup>6</sup> continues to choke off any demands for increased resource equality (Amin 2004).

The rise of neoliberalism has come to be associated with an antiauthoritarianism that exacerbates the decline of an already weakened state and a concomitant promise of “democratization.” Many liberal scholars, citizens, and activists currently celebrate the opportunity they see for marginalized groups to now mobilize, and for civil society, more generally, to flourish. The declining ability of the state to regulate and direct a domestic development project has, to some eyes, created this welcome opportunity for resistance and grassroots empowerment. Yet, most grassroots movements find themselves struggling to be effective political forces in an age of free-market politics in which access to the state is now mediated by direct economic power.

While it is true that the marginalized are increasingly allowed to make demands and to organize within civil society, the reconfigured neoliberal state stops them short of bringing their demands to fruition through government. Through a combination of decentralization and an increased privatization of public services, the state comes to function as an organizational tool for market expansion, and less a vehicle for representative democracy or resource distribution. Thus neoliberal populism creates a force that empowers people to act without ever providing any actual mechanism to help movements realize their goals: it has led to an era of both more political voices and increasing state quiescence (Petras and Veltmeyer 2003; Teichman 1995). This reorganization of the state thus forces any current demand for agrarian reform firmly within the parameters of a depoliticized (market-oriented) project. In this way, an emphasis on land reform alone as a means to boost agricultural productivity avoids addressing the other dimensions of power and historical inequity that in the current agenda have marginalized both the rural sector and the rural poor. Similarly, a populist struggle for land that does not take into consideration power, social rights, and the historical struggle of small farmers<sup>7</sup> and the landless could quickly become part of the neoliberal project and lead to increased political exclusiveness.

### A Call for Agrarian Reform from Below: The Small Farmer and the Landless

In many nations rural dwellers still rely on the land to grow their own food and to provide sustenance for their families (Ghimire 2001b, 17–18). Land in rural

communities is the central component ensuring the well-being and longevity of families, much as Chayanov saw it. In this context land is not a commodity, it is a source of life and society. Yet this foundation of life for the world's poorest is systematically denied to them. The exclusion from this life-giving resource is what drives the call for land and agrarian reform from below. Basic statistics on landholding and farm size from around the world can help to underscore this point. In Honduras, for example, the rural population was 64 percent in 2002. A 2003 agricultural census calculated that 2.4 million hectares, or 62 percent of the nation's agricultural land, were under the ownership of the largest farmers (those with 50 or more hectares), yet these farms made up only 10 percent of the total number of farms (Courville 2005, 62–63). The total landholding of the smallest farmers (those with less than 5 hectares) accounted for a little more than 3.5 thousand hectares, or 9 percent of the total farmland in the nation. It is the smallest farmers, however, who account for over 72 percent of the total farms in the nation (Courville 2005, 62–63). The most recent data also show a 28 percent increase in landholding concentration for the largest farmers since the implementation of neoliberal reforms, while the smallest farmers faced a 4 percent decline in overall landholding area.<sup>8</sup>

This is by no means a Latin American phenomenon. Uneven land concentration has created persistent landlessness in the Philippines. Population statistics from 2000 show that 48 percent of the Philippine population live in rural areas and that three-quarters of the rural poor depend on farming and agriculture for their livelihood (Balisacan 2002; Economist Intelligence Unit [EIU] 2004, 16). Yet at the same time, official estimates during the preceding decade report that between 58 and 65 percent of all agricultural workers were considered to be landless at any given time (Riedinger 1990, 17–18). Landholding in the Philippines has favored the largest landholders, who are often linked to positions of political power and prominence, as in the case of former president (1986–1992) Corazon Aquino. Aquino's administration endorsed land reform policy during her presidential tenure, but it effectively avoided major confiscations that would have dismantled the largest landholdings, including her own family's 6,000-hectare estate (de Guzman, Garrido, and Manahan 2004). The 2002 Philippine agricultural census found that while the total number of farms since the 1991 census had increased by 4.6 percent, the average landholding of small farmers fell from 2.5 to 2 hectares. The limited data on land tenure makes this change hard to interpret, but the ineffectiveness of past reforms and the questionable actions of past administrations suggest a continued trend toward the erosion of small-farm

landholdings. This, in part, has mobilized small farmers across the nation to call for agrarian reform that is more transparent and that is designed not by the landed and political elites, but by those who seek land for subsistence (Borras 2003a; Llanto and Ballesteros 2003, 3–5).

The trend of land concentration and exclusion has also shaped the fate of small producers and indigenous people in Africa. Take, for instance, the case of Tanzania, which struggled to escape a colonial legacy of large coffee farms and plantation agriculture established under German and English rule. In the late 1960s, shortly after independence, the Tanzanian government removed the Masai people from their ancestral territory in an effort to collectivize agriculture, dismantle colonial land-tenure patterns, and abolish plantation agriculture (Hyden 1980). The reform relied on the invocation of a fictive Masai collectivity, which was supposed to provide the necessary dynamism for socialized village agriculture. The reform effort failed in large part. A decline in agricultural production followed. This brought increased private investment and a voracious land grab from foreign developers that continued to keep the Masai from their ancestral lands (Williams 1996, 218). Forty years after Tanzanian independence, food security is still elusive, and the country's agricultural export production remains under the control of foreign investors (Mihayo 2003; Ponte 2004, 622–25; Skarstein 2005, 334). Furthermore, 48 percent of Tanzania has been designated as wildlife preserve, even though as recently as 2001, 63 percent of the population still relied on agriculture and fishing for subsistence (Economist Intelligence Unit 2004, 15). The land squeeze has increased the number of Masai employed in the newly established safari tourist industry, which continues to funnel the lion's share of GDP into foreign pockets (ole Ndaskoi 2003a, 2003b). Many landless Masai struggle to survive, earning meager wages while trying to maintain some of their traditional hunting and gathering rights on state lands, to feed themselves and their families (ole Ndaskoi 2003a).

How such uneven land concentration arises—whether in Honduras, the Philippines, or Tanzania—is no mystery. Though varied, the agents that account for these examples of uneven land concentration are invariably acting within a broad macroeconomic climate that privileges large-scale industry. Modern production schemes such as logging, dam construction, tourism, large-scale agricultural export, and cattle ranching are hungry for land, and their land consumption pushes rural communities to the margins in almost every case (Williams 1986). Rather than being protected by the state, small farmers, indigenous communities, and peasants have been forced by govern-

ments, under the banner of “broad-based rural development,” to work within the demands of the market. The agricultural modernization championed by governments and other global elites does not necessarily lead to new opportunities for rural people, who are, if they were not already, marginal to the increased GDP of national development (Bryceson 2001; Carter and Barham 1996; Kay 1997). International financing of the agricultural sector builds a very uneven playing field that is tilted against small producers, and the net economic gains of world competition invariably involve vast gain for a few and devastating loss for many.

Though part of a profoundly political project, neoliberal land policy tries to smother its own politics, couching its interventions as purely “technical” or expedient (Ferguson 1990). Through this “technicalized” policy, small producers and the rural poor around the world continue to be squeezed out of national development schemes. The landless have, however, fought back. Indeed, despite efforts to depoliticize the claims of landless people for agrarian reform, there is ample evidence that the failure of the neoliberal project is what has fueled the repoliticization of the very people it has excluded (Patel 2006). They have fought back not by adopting the language of technical efficiency or expediency, but by means of political struggle, direct action, or strategic linkages with international support systems or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Demonstrating that neoliberalism will fail in theory is one thing; showing how it fails in fact is quite another. Listening to the experiences of those who have endured the onslaught of modern agrarian reform policies, not only do we see the theoretical deficiencies of the agrarian reform program, we learn how this program, at best, willfully ignores existing power relations, thus compounding them and exacerbating the inequalities that result. This is important because, although the attempt to paper over historical inequalities has been successful—to the extent that a range of government policies in the Global South are premised on their irrelevance—the on-the-ground experience of power persists and, with it, the possibility of other approaches to agrarian politics. At the time this book goes to press, for example, the South African government has taken a stern line in opposing any further expansion of its land program on the grounds that such a move would endanger “investor confidence.” Yet even within the ruling African National Congress (ANC), many grassroots party members remain convinced of the necessity for broader powers of land confiscation and of their wider implementation. Still, the belief that land reform should happen within a paradigm of “willing buyer–willing

seller” is pervasive within most development circles. Indeed, South Africa is one of many “success stories” that the World Bank has attempted to spin in the Global South, with the explicit aim of furthering its policies. In this book, we consider these policy experiments and their failings—the Bank’s “success” stories are demonstrably inefficient, failing on the Bank’s own terms (see chapter 5 in this volume). But the issue of the success or failure of a land reform policy is even subtler than just World Bank policy failure, and has to do with the fact that the terms for understanding land reform success and failure have shifted over the last few decades.

There are currently at least two competing frameworks for establishing “success” in agrarian reform. The first, rooted in the World Bank, sees efficiency and effectiveness<sup>9</sup> as the defining characteristics of successful land reform. This framework holds much of the politics, and the allocation of resources having to do with agriculture, as a constant. Over the past decade, during which land reform has existed under these parameters, this mode of agrarian reform has established itself as, at best, a palliative approach, maintaining the *status quo* while tinkering on the margins in order to address the most prominent and acute symptoms of rural dispossession. Before the (as yet incomplete) capture of policy options by neoliberalism, land reform was, to a greater or lesser extent, part of a broader series of interventions in agrarian and national reform projects, encompassing considerations of nationhood, identity, employment, history, the Cold War, decolonization, and the provision of food. In these circumstances, metrics of success were far more ambiguous and varied.

A second contemporary framework for posing “the land question” is offered by La Via Campesina, the international peasant movement,<sup>10</sup> whose framework is inherently plural. It demands a democratic process in which a range of people not only “participate,” that is, play a central role in setting the agenda, but also shape and dictate the contours of agrarian policy (Patel 2006). The terms of reference for this kind of land reform are not written in Washington, but in the fields—and defining its success or failure is in itself a democratic project, informed by a history of struggle. Successful land reform, under this rubric, depends on the political and historical context at the time reform is implemented, but it invariably involves a mass democratic engagement and will result in systemic, widespread redistribution, requiring a deep commitment from the state. In most cases, though not all, the poorest need the state to protect them, to fund their projects, and to engage in the radical redistribution that will ensure that the reform involves more than simply a cosmetic change. Successful land reform will be, in a word, political. The

emphasis on the political is important to bear in mind, when contrasting it with the current crop of supposed Bank successes.

## Land and Agrarian Reform after World War II

A first step toward understanding the neoliberalization of agrarian reform and the World Bank model is to look more closely at the historical variance of agrarian reforms worldwide since World War II. This period (1945–2000) covers the process of decolonization and a reconfiguration of the international trading system. This reconfiguration (Friedmann 1982) had the effect, after their nominal independence, of leaving many nations in the Global South shackled to their preindependence economic roles as producers of agricultural exports and natural resources for their former colonizers. The entrenchment of colonial economic relations, within the emerging nation-states of the then-designated “third world,” was a design feature of the postwar settlement (Hobsbawm 1994). Toward the end of the Second World War, the Allied powers held a landmark conference at Bretton Woods in New Hampshire, at which the architecture for many of today’s international financial institutions was laid out. The web of world markets became more binding through these organizations as lending and credit became new carrots for shaping the development policies of the emergent nations, and these nations assumed mostly dependent positions within this nexus.

A major outcome of this conference was the establishment and development of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). These international financial institutions were developed by the victors of the war in an attempt to maintain international economic stability. In many ways, these institutions have worked to shape the function of land within developing nations, and they have a longstanding relationship to national banking systems that have continued to finance large-scale agricultural modernization and expansion in the Global South (Bello 1994). Indeed, it is possible to view the considerable resources—political and military, as well as financial—invested in these institutions’ success as a sign of the threat posed by agrarian reform to the core nations after World War II. To understand this situation, it is essential to explore how the meaning of land reform has changed through the latter half of the twentieth century up to now. A brief look at a few nations from the Global South will help illustrate the variance in the conceptualization of land reform.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, four nations had already engaged

in varying degrees of land reform efforts as part of their plans for independence, national development, and change. As early as 1910 Mexico, China, Guatemala, and the former Soviet Union all made direct efforts to alter the relationship between land and peasantry. Different assumptions about the role of the peasantry in these four nations became the impetus for the redistribution of land and the reorganization of relationships in the agricultural sector (Enríquez 2003, 2004; Kerkvliet and Selden 1998; Lewin 1968; Thiesenhusen 1995). These early efforts ranged from the peasant revolution–driven land reforms in China and the rather more anti-peasant transformations of the Soviet Union, to the reorganization of export agriculture coupled with the rise of popular struggle in Guatemala<sup>11</sup> and the radical agrarian struggle of Mexico. Each of these nations successfully moved land into the hands of the landless, but that alone did not correct persistent, uneven distribution of wealth and power in the countryside.

In the case of Mexico, peasants have fought and struggled for land both before and after the implementation of larger revolutionary movements for independence. The hacienda system was weakened through the revolutionary transitions, and land was redistributed to *campesinos*, but securing social equality for *campesinos* has been an ongoing and increasingly frustrated project (Henriques and Patel 2003; Thiesenhusen 1995, 29–49). In the Soviet Union, peasants reluctantly participated in land reform efforts, and in most instances faced violence, murder, and increased rural conflict throughout the process (Lewin 1968, 107–31). Land tenure in the Soviet Union was mostly reshaped through efforts at collectivization and the establishment of large state farms, changes driven primarily not by the needs of rural producers, but by urban demands for cheap food, a Kautskian view of the peasantry, and an inaccurate analysis of rural society by party elites.<sup>12</sup> In China, by contrast, the needs of rural populations were foremost, and many of the beneficiaries of land reform participated in the revolutionary transformation of power relations in rural areas (Hinton 1996).

On the other end of the distributive continuum is the case of Guatemala. Early colonial relationships to export markets brought about some limited, but notable, land tenure reforms prior to the twentieth century (Williams 1994, 61–69). This early demand for land tenure reform emerged in response to the conflicting interests of indigenous communities, political elites, and large-scale domestic coffee producers. The latter saw some benefit in extending the small producers' tenure—allowing them to grow food for their own consumption, thus requiring less income to sustain their

families—while maintaining reliance on seasonal peasant labor at very low wages on large coffee *haciendas*. It wasn't until the period from 1944 to 1952, however, that the nation pursued an official program of land and agrarian reform. With this formal state commitment to agrarian reform came much social upheaval that, on first glance, would suggest a redistributive success—a case of increased smallholder beneficiaries and the reorganization of rural social relations. Yet, despite the upheaval and international attention brought about by these official efforts at reform, the impact of the land redistribution that occurred during the period was quickly reversed. (see chapter 1 this volume)

This brief consideration of the four countries that saw significant land reform before World War II point to the implications of the larger structural (i.e., political, economic, historical) dimensions of agrarian change. These cases also helped to stamp in the minds of policy elites elsewhere the very real possibility of radical land reform implementation through violence, carried out perhaps by those most oppressed under current regimes. Following the interruption of World War II, these examples informed the thinking of those on both sides of the Cold War. Communism, or the Cold War fear of its expansion, fueled a number of post-World War II land reform efforts promoted by the United States and its allies to deter unwieldy revolutions from below. And behind these ideologically charged efforts remained the questions—summed up in the refrain with which we began the chapter—of who controls the land, who is entitled to use it, and for what ends. It would be an exaggeration to say that land reform shaped the Cold War, but it is useful to see the struggle for land as part of a broader struggle over the meaning of and limits to property. While the contours of power and the mechanisms through which land reform was effected shaped the ultimate success or failure of land reform efforts in every country experiencing such reforms after World War II, the question of property burned at the heart of agrarian reform.

With the above framework in mind, a team of researchers<sup>13</sup> from the Land Research Action Network (LRAN) compared historical data on formal land reform efforts<sup>14</sup> in twenty countries since World War II (see figure 1).<sup>15</sup> Though varied, the impetus for land redistribution in these nations often reflected significant efforts to address economic stagnation, to acquire independence, to build political solidarity, and/or to “develop” national agricultural export production. Figure 1 lists the twenty countries chronologically by date of land reform implementation and by period of comparison.<sup>16</sup> From these historical experiences, the authors identified four distinct categories of land reform



implementation: Cold War proxy, endogenous social revolution, postwar allied consolidation, and endogenous political compromise.

*Group 1: Cold War Proxies (Cases: El Salvador, Honduras, Philippines, South Vietnam).* Reforms in these countries were pursued in the effort to quell peasant unrest, stave off larger revolutionary action, and/or comply with the US and/or Eastern Bloc foreign and economic policies. Formal land reform policies were a mix of expropriation and redistribution of public lands.

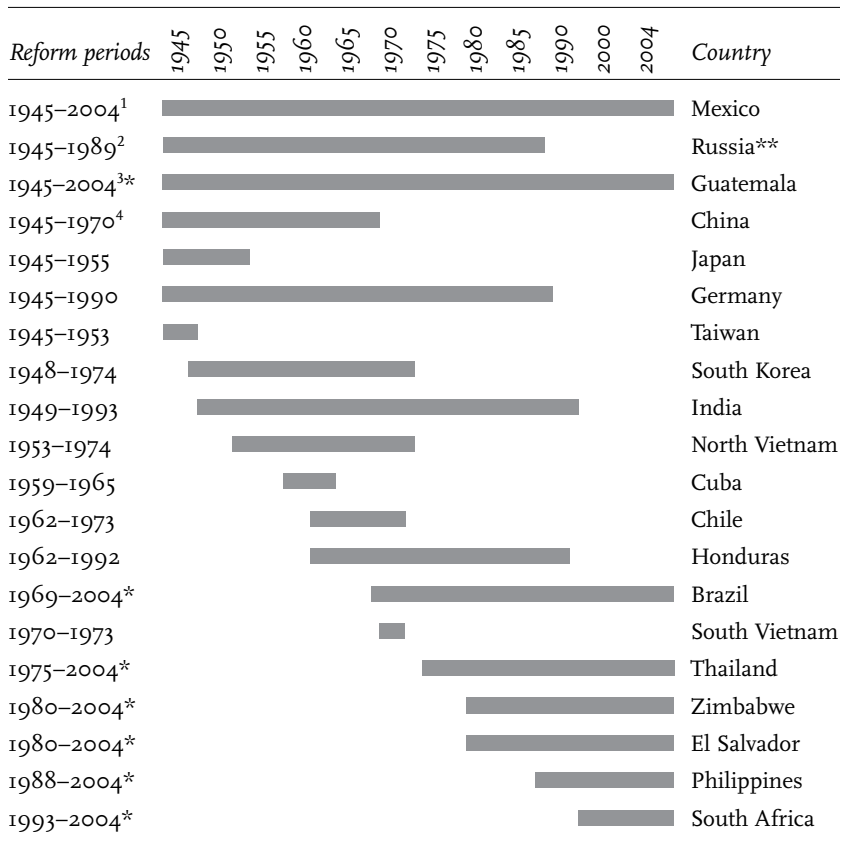
*Group 2: Endogenous Social Revolution (Cases: China, Cuba, Mexico, North Vietnam, former Soviet Union, Kerala state [India]).* These reforms emerged in response to social pressures and revolutionary platforms or national struggles for independence. In these cases land reform was implemented along with more comprehensive agrarian reforms aiming to address longstanding inequalities regarding access to land and to reduce persistent rural poverty. Here the state played an active role in instituting and carrying out reform policies. Large amounts of land were expropriated from large landholders and redistributed to landless beneficiaries.

*Group 3: Postwar Allied Consolidation (Cases: South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Germany).* These land reforms were carried out in concert with industrial expansion and other economic reforms by the state, with the support of the major post–World War II political players, and aimed to avoid persistent inequality in land tenure before engaging in industrial expansion. Land was expropriated from large landholders and redistributed to landless beneficiaries by fiat.

*Group 4: Endogenous Political Compromise (Cases: Brazil, Guatemala, India, South Africa, Zimbabwe).* These reforms emerged largely in response to a combination of pressures exerted by large social movements, landless organizing and government policy making that aimed to meet new demands of export-oriented agricultural production. Limited amounts of land were expropriated from large landholders and redistributed to a limited number of landless beneficiaries.

While these typologies are not hard and fast—many countries fell simultaneously under the categories of Cold War proxies and post–World War II allied consolidation efforts in the attempt to build bulwarks against communism—they reveal that among the most sweeping land reforms (i.e., swift, state-backed reforms, involving a large number of families and leaving little quar-

FIGURE 1 Periods of land reform in select countries, 1945–2004



\*ongoing

\*\*former Soviet Union

<sup>1</sup> (1917); <sup>2</sup> (1923); <sup>3</sup> (1944); <sup>4</sup> (1910).

ter for existing elites) were those preemptively imposed by capitalists— notably under the postwar allied consolidation category. A measure of the success of these land reforms has been the extent to which all the countries that experienced them have developed strong and robust internationally linked economies (though only after a prolonged period of growth fueled by domestic industrial protection) (Hart 2002). A little less robust have been the compromises forged through endogenous social revolution, and more fissiparous still have been the settlements agreed through endogenous political compromise, with the most extreme cases of land injustice residing in those states that were Cold War battle grounds. Yet the Cold War affected all land reforms,

whether directly, through endogenous struggles between capitalism and communism, or by the perceived threat of communism in “frontline states.”

The end of the Cold War heralded at least the temporary end of the possibility of radical land reform programs. While it was inconceivable that land could be redistributed through a willing buyer–willing seller approach at the beginning of the Cold War, by the Cold War’s end it was inconceivable that it could be done any other way. By the early 1970s land reform policy making had already begun to shift to a “one-size-fits-all” market-assisted land reform (MALR) imposed by the IMF, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the World Bank. A general shift from the state-led agrarian reforms of the earlier part of the century to a demand-driven, MALR process ensued (Borras, chapter 5 in this volume; Kay 2002a). The proponents of this kind of reform claimed that the state-led reforms failed to distribute land adequately to the landless and resulted, for the most part, in a distortion of land markets, and they argued that this prevented efficient producers from acquiring land and encouraged inefficient farmers to continue farming. Borras (chapter 5) provides an exemplary treatment of the substance of these arguments. The issue of whether or not there was any truth to these arguments was almost irrelevant to their reception. As Kelsey (1995) notes in a different context, a great part of the successful adoption of the neoliberal regime comes through its ability to claim that “there is no alternative.” In many instances, it certainly feels as if there is none. Under neoliberal agrarian reform, there has been a concerted effort to disparage people living in rural areas, de-skill farmers, and demobilize their organizations to remove the possibility of an alternative. Yet the alternative persists.

The tragedy of neoliberal land policy, as each of the chapters in this book shows, is that it prevents successful land reform—reform that lifts people out of poverty, increases levels of resource equality, raises living standards, ensures the subsistence of the rural dweller, and, in some cases, even increases agricultural export production (de Janvry and Sadoulet 1989; Herring 2000; Sobhan 1993). Successful land reform can also result in the improved environmental protection of land when stewardship is granted to those who depend directly on the land for their own well-being and survival (Holt-Giménez 2002; Ghimire 2001b). Land reform programs, however, are necessary but not sufficient to accomplish these goals. They require integration into a broader strategy for rural development that also considers the landless and the small producer as the focus of several coordinated efforts (Patel 2003).

The promarket argument fails to acknowledge not only the noncommod-

ity nature of food production, but also the falsity of the assumption that rising GDP inevitably leads to decreased poverty for rural dwellers. Conceptualizing agriculture as a commodity-oriented system of production, the World Bank's MALR models and the neoliberal economic models that spawned it avoid any direct consideration of the relationship between the land and the majority of the world's poor.

## About the Cases in Part I

The first part of this book consists of four case studies representing nations from each region in which LRAN has focused its efforts. Guatemala, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and India serve as exemplars of reform efforts categorized as endogenous political compromise in group 4, above. Regardless of the specifics in each case, all four countries have experienced one or more historical periods of land reform that fell short of the hopes and demands of the most resource-poor agents in each nation. These shortcomings are not surprising, of course, given that compromise was required for the implementation of any land reform policy at all. As such, compromise is one of the few attributes common to all these national cases. The African cases share some regional similarities as well, but even with the regional overlap there is quite a bit of variance among these countries. Yet, despite the national differences described by each of the authors of these four studies, all four nations have strangely found themselves facing similar policy options at the turn of the twenty-first century.

It is this common point of arrival that leads these four authors to take stock and raise important research and policy questions with regard to the homogenized land and agrarian reform policy being imposed upon their nations. Through brief historical review, demographic comparison, and general policy analysis, the four cases in this section begin to highlight failures and problems associated with the received neoliberal model that has unfolded before them. The remainder of the book will explore in more depth and with greater analysis the themes, criticisms, and alternatives introduced throughout part I. A brief overview of each chapter in part I will help to direct the reader toward some of the more salient challenges now facing these nations, on their path toward implementing a land reform that will more directly benefit the landless and resource poor.

The first chapter, by Wittman and Saldivar-Tanaka, focuses on the long, contradictory agrarian reform policies of Guatemala. The Guatemala case high-

lights the changing role of the state with regard to the land question in general, and the implementation of agrarian reform policy, in particular. The state played a crucial role in shaping land policy both before and after the World War II era, while it has also implemented formal policies of repression—enlisting military force when necessary—to stop any demands that have threatened the power of landed elites tied to export production. The history of agrarian reform in Guatemala is a violent one. Past and present efforts at agrarian change have been accompanied by much hardship and loss throughout the countryside. The authors delve into the outcomes of earlier attempts at land reform and find them mostly hollow. A brief review of landholding shows that the beneficiaries of past efforts have largely been those who sought compromise, via the state, with landless peasants and indigenous peoples: the landed elite and agribusiness holders. Wittman and Saldivar-Tanaka emphasize the limitations of these earlier gains and briefly explore the ways that peace and human rights movements in the 1990s began to impact the breadth and depth of popular political participation. The role of the 1996 peace accords is considered in this chapter, as is the ongoing impact of a century of agricultural export on the nation's land tenure system. Finally, the author highlights the ways in which political and landed elites—often one and the same—continue to use the rhetoric of land reform to appease foreign interests, both political and economic, as new land market conversions have become the emphasis of state policy.

In chapter 2 Tom Lebert chronicles the Zimbabwe case, one of the most recent cases of high-profile land seizure. Lebert provides a brief historical sketch of the ways colonial rule and the issue of race have shaped a struggle for land that is tied to the need for both productive resources and political power. The relationship of Africa to its former colonial powers (Britain in this case) has not dissolved easily. The Zimbabwe case points to the significant ways in which legislation and legal codes play a part in determining who is considered landless at any point in history, and, further, who is deserving of land and full land tenure at any time. Zimbabwe poses critical questions about race and power that are often overlooked in general discussions of economic or technical reform programs. Lebert's contribution to this section provides some new vantage points from which to reassess the struggle for land and agrarian reform in that nation and across Africa more generally, even as the situation deteriorates for an increasing numbers of Zimbabweans.<sup>17</sup>

Positing an interesting regional comparison, South Africa is considered in chapter 3. Though close to Zimbabwe geographically, it shares a quite different

historical and post-colonial relationship. Wellington Thwala's consideration of South Africa examines the legacy of apartheid on the nation through codified legal mandates, which used categories of race to determine definitions of property, citizenship, and personhood. Thwala argues that this practice has left an indelible mark on the agrarian question in South Africa, and he discusses how the legacy of racialized land policy persists well into the twenty-first century under new World Bank–directed reform programs.

Increasingly, the political landscape of South Africa is being shaped by an ongoing struggle between rural and urban dwellers for land and resource allocation. This demographic split between urban and rural dwellers in South Africa has presented new dilemmas for political organizing around questions of land distribution. Shifts toward industrial expansion, increased direct foreign investment in agriculture, and national policies of modernization have further marginalized the rural sector, with poverty rates in rural areas systematically higher, and human development indicators systematically lower, than in urban areas (United Nations Development Programme 2003). This gap between the needs of rural dwellers and the dictates of an urban policy bias is considered with relation to both national land redistribution policies and recent land market conversion efforts in South Africa. Thwala closes the chapter by exploring alternatives to the World Bank's national agenda, calling for a "people-centered land reform" and discussing the necessary components of a successful alternative to land privatization in South Africa.

The case of India, Manpreet Sethi explains, is a history of broken promises and of encroachment on many resources fundamental to farming communities and ecological preservation: water, forests, and common property. India is the only case that offers a compelling regional example of expropriative land reform within a larger comprehensive national reform policy. The Kerala state reforms would easily fit in group 2 (endogenous social revolution), as landless farmers and poor rural dwellers in that region persisted in their efforts to elect a socialist government in their state and then to press for agrarian reform. Yet most Indian states have not seen large-scale, comprehensive agrarian reforms that have benefited large numbers of landless dwellers. In this way, India serves as a persuasive example of why land reform alone, without a comprehensive agrarian reform project, can quickly become part of the popular neoliberal project to accommodate market expansion under the guise of poverty reduction, which use the poor as justification for, but not a direct beneficiary of, neoliberal policy making.

A recent period of urban migration in India has also posed several new

challenges for rural households, and Sethi draws attention to the question of gender and the historical relationship of women to land and agrarian social structure. This final chapter of part I leaves us to consider not only the issues of historical variance, regional differences, race, gender, and property relations, but also the appeal of neoliberal populism to mobilize support for projects that ultimately confound efforts for equitable resource distribution, food sovereignty, and self-sufficiency.

Together these cases paint a varied historical picture of land reform. While each nation has been brought closer to world markets by neoliberal interventions, their trajectories are still deeply weighed down by the ghosts of their pasts. In part II, we analyze the themes of these different histories, and in part III, we investigate the alternative trajectories that, as ever, continue to be fought for in the parliaments, policy rooms, streets, and fields of the Global South.

# Notes

## Introduction and Overview. The Resurgence of Agrarian Reform in the Twenty-first Century

1. Indeed, many urban problems as well have their origins in displacement and in rural–urban migration due to landlessness in the countryside.

2. Those regions outside of the large industrial nations of the northern hemisphere; also referred to as the Third World or less developed countries (LDCs).

3. The early small farmers of the US came from privileged European stock and/or took land that had not been held by colonial powers prior to their arrival. These farmers' tie to the land was one of convenience and legal maneuvering against Native Americans. There was no landed aristocracy and there was no relationship that resembled, even remotely, the European feudalism that was exported to the Global South. See Clark (1990).

4. Figures for landlessness are often based on estimates and are difficult to measure due to problems with sampling, rural–urban migration, and the informal relationships between landless dwellers and land. In 2000, estimates of landlessness around the world were reported at about 100 million.

5. At its core, “food sovereignty” is defined throughout this volume as the prioritization of food production by peasant and family farms for domestic and local market, using diverse ecological production methods. In addition to this focus on small producers, Rosset (see conclusion in this volume) elaborates on the importance of ensuring access to natural resources, fair prices, gender equity, seed protection and public expenditure toward these ends.

6. “Economism” is defined here as a reduction of society and human interaction to a series of cost-benefit analyses, and the conscious efforts by individuals, groups, and nations to maximize their utility through market exchange.

7. The categories of small producer, small farmer, and peasant farmer are used interchangeably within the literature on rural development and land reform.



While the literature does not always distinguish among the three groupings, there is a general consensus that these refer to those producers who are dependent on the smallest landholdings (usually less than 10 hectares of land) within a given society.

8. These calculations are based on data from INE 2003 only.

9. Two central definitions of efficiency inform economic thinking. Pareto efficiency, or Pareto optimality, is a situation in which no change in resources can be made without making someone worse off. This situation clearly tilts against redistributive land reform; any case in which a landowner, deprived of land for redistributive purposes, can claim to be worse off, makes the system non-Pareto efficient. The second kind of efficiency, allocative efficiency, has a broader definition: a system is allocatively efficient if resources are optimized in such a way as to maximize the net benefit attained through their use. Again, though, the World Bank's understanding of the benefit to be achieved in the domain of land redistribution tends to remain narrowly defined and short in scope, excluding broader values of equity, justice, or social change.

10. [www.viacampesina.org](http://www.viacampesina.org).

11. For a good discussion of this issue, see Williams (1994) and Brockett (1998, 101–6).

12. It is not sufficient to explain the Soviet experience as simply a cause and effect relationship between “large-scale bias” and the destruction of the peasantry. Resnick and Wolff (2002) have made a good case for considering the distorted class analysis of the Soviet Communist Party during the early part of the twentieth century in any evaluation of the policies that took place during that time. The problem was not just one of anti-peasant bias, but a distorted view of how the full transition to socialism was accomplished. An inaccurate analysis of the rural sector led to a great deal of misdirected policies that originated with, and were perpetuated by, a false belief that the Soviet Union had already arrived at communism (i.e., a “classless” society with a proletarian majority).

13. This team, led by Raj Patel, included Michael Courville, Julia Clarke, and Paulina Novo, with expertise contributed by Peter Rosset.

14. Land reform was conceptualized as a systematic redistribution or retitling of land on a large scale, which transfers arable land to landless beneficiaries and serves as a leveling mechanism for wealth concentration in rural areas.

15. These nations were selected for their historical importance. Time constraints prevented a full global examination of land reform, with attention focused on states that are either directly involved in the LRAN project or are of importance to LRAN partners. Resource constraints also prevented the exploration of units of analysis that were not nation states. For this reason, certain kinds of land reform remain invisible to this analysis, and there are important omissions, including but not limited to Nicaragua, Tanzania, West Africa, and the Middle East. Despite these limitations, the authors believe the analysis to be of some merit.

16. While the primary period of our evaluation begins in 1945, China,

Guatemala, Mexico, and the former Soviet Union had ongoing reform movements and policies prior to the World War II period. They have been included because of the scope of land reform efforts and continued significance of land reform in economic and political planning during the period of study.

17. In the summer of 2005, Zimbabwe's President Mugabe had implemented a sweeping forced eviction in urban areas known as "Operation Murambatsvina" ("Clean up the Filth"). The professed goal of this initiative was to relocate poor urban dwellers to rural areas through force, if necessary. In an instant, thousands of Zimbabweans became homeless, landless dwellers. The implications of this forced relocation were only beginning to be observed in the fall of 2005. Many of those evicted from urban homes were those who had left rural areas in earlier years to flee from violence during the 2000 national elections and to escape persistent drought. The immediate results of the Mugabe administration's policy were observable human rights abuses, increased landlessness, hunger, and rural poverty. This incident further highlights the persistent struggle of the landless to find stable, safe residence within their own nation, even after sweeping land reform policy was implemented only a few years earlier.

## Chapter 1: The Agrarian Question in Guatemala

1. Referring to those farmers who have made investments in land, machinery, agricultural technology, and/or fixed irrigation systems.

2. Estimates of poverty in Guatemala vary. The World Bank (WB) estimates that in 2000, 66 percent of the total population lived in poverty, including 86 percent of the rural population and 93 percent of the indigenous population. The figures given here are the most recent figures cited by the UN Mission in Guatemala, May 2000.

3. Perera (1993) notes the link in Guatemala between land tenure and health, in which landless families were shown to have much higher infant mortality rates (278).

4. Migration due to insufficient landholdings has also been cited as a source for loss of cultural identity and community (Katz 2000).

5. Descendants of Spanish colonial families who married indigenous Guatemalans and come from a mixed ethnic heritage.

6. Large landed estates held by one owner or a family, and specializing in agricultural export production.

7. Coffee, cotton, citronella, lemon, tea, bananas, sugarcane, tobacco, rubber, quinine, fruit, hay, beans, cereals, and other commercial crops.

8. Leading up the 1952 reform, tax evasion, undervaluation of land for tax purposes, overvaluation for forced sales, and the nonenforcement of progressive taxation of idle lands were common problems. As will be discussed below, these problems remain in present-day Guatemala, and present serious obstacles for the successful implementation of a market-based land reform.

9. Thiesenhusen (1995) characterized the potential beneficiaries of the Arbenz